YOUTH TRAJECTORIES SERIES

IRAQI YOUTH IN CONTEXTS OF CONFLICT:

FRAGMENTATION, DIVERGENT STRATEGIES, AND THE IMPOSSI-BILITY OF INCLUSION

Adel Bakawan

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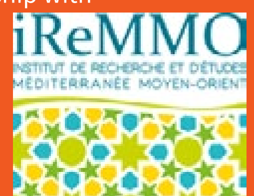

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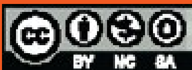

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PHOTO: Iraqi youth carry a 500 meters long flag of Iraq during a march to spread a unity message organised by young activists in Kirkuk, Iraq on October 23, 2017. © Ali Mukarrem Garip/AA

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Foreword

What are the various consequences on a young person's life trajectory when she or he comes into adulthood in a context of conflict? What happens to anticipated plans for the future – education, marriage, first employment – when they are profoundly disrupted by the eruption of conflict, and what types of coping mechanisms and strategies are adopted by youth in the face of such disruptions? And how does the transition into adulthood in a fluid normative context – where violence can be abundant, gender traditional roles can be upended, and trauma widespread – shape individual political values and beliefs as well as social relations with the community and within the family?

In exploring how youth navigate their own lives and construct themselves when the transition to adulthood occurs in a context of conflict, evidence shows that conflict acts as both an opportunity and a constraint to youth in terms of livelihood opportunities, pathways for wellbeing, experiences of political inclusion, and feelings of empowerment and disempowerment. At the same time, though, youth trajectories during contexts of conflict are neither linear nor strictly dependent on the structure of available opportunities. Indeed, how youth make decisions with regards to their own lives, and the factors that influence their decision-making, demonstrate complex processes involving specific contextual factors, the configuration of social relations, and positionality within conflict dynamics, among others. In this sense, youth trajectories in contexts of conflict are both highly diverse and often unexpected but also, critically, can shift repeatedly. Unpacking this complexity is of critical importance, though, if we are to grasp the multiple and even contradictory ways in which conflict impacts the trajectories of young adults. It also critical to understanding the broader implications at the societal level in terms of future patterns of political participation, beliefs, and attitudes as well social and gender relations within and between communities and generations.

From 2020-2021, the Arab Reform Initiative undertook a broad research program to investigate the personal trajectories of youth in conflict, focusing on those who have come into adulthood since 2011 in Libya, Iraq, and Syria. This research, based on 75 qualitative semi-structured interviews in each country and, where possible, focus group discussions, has investigated the perceptions and decision-making processes of youth and broader-term implications in political, economic, social, and personal terms. More precisely, this research investigated youth trajectories and broader social and political implications through analysis at three distinct levels. At the micro-level, the research investigated the personal narratives of youth and how they view the impact of the conflict in terms of personal self-construction. This included investigating their decision-making matrices and aspirations, the coping strategies they have found, as well as how they have felt empowered/disempowered in the context of conflict. At the meso-level, the research explored the contextual factors mediating youth's decision-making and their margins of maneuver, including war and peacebuilding economies, existing programming and external aid for youth, shifting power structures and social hierarchies, and normative fluctuations, conducting intersectional analysis to understand how different social positions (ethnicity, religion, gender, class, etc.) shape different narratives and strategies. Finally, at the meta-level, the research sought to assess the diverse political and peacebuilding content with regards to youth values, agency, and forms of engagement, focusing in particular on youth meaningful political participation, everyday practices of peacebuilding, and the establishment of gender equality if and where it occurred.

The study presented here relays the outcomes of the research undertaken with Iraqi youth, where field interviews took place in 2020 in the cities of Mosul and Basra, sites where different types of conflict have occurred, ranging from the violent conflict with ISIS to the transformative social conflict of the Tishreen protest movement. In taking stock of these in-depth and highly personal interviews, this study contributes new knowledge and insights regarding how the transition to adulthood under conflict has impacted the acquisition of experiences and skills, needs and aspirations, and changes in perceptions and perspectives of Iraqi youth. The research presented here thus explores how youth narrate their personal trajectories and the impact of events on their own lives, but also how they understand the country's political evolution and the nature of the conflict itself. The study explores what factors (moral, ideological, political, social, economic, personal, or other) motivate or drive their decisions, how they perceive of opportunities and constraints for their own pathways, and how they find or create opportunities for themselves. The study also investigates how gender norms and gender performative roles been transformed as a result of the conflicts and the impact of these changes in their own social relations and aspirations for the future. Finally, the study sheds light on Iraqi youth's personal attitudes

towards violence and non-violence, what concepts such as peace, justice, and reconciliation actually mean to them and what they look like in practice, and the extent to which youth perceive of agency in their own lives and the roles they seek to play in renewing the political order and social contract of Iraq.

In exploring these variety of themes, this study also has crucial policy relevance. Youth face particular forms of precarity that render them among the most vulnerable population groups in the transition out of conflict and reconstruction phase,[1] yet at the same time they are a key demographic in sustaining stability and peace and in leading broader conflict transformation processes. Despite this, youth as a particular population subset are often under-investigated, and under-serviced by policy-makers and external stakeholders implementing programming for conflict relief and post-conflict recovery. Much attention is paid to children (meaning those in adolescence or younger), given the rights-based approaches that have been adopted in the global arena and the existence of large-scale policy frameworks and organizations that care for them such as UNICEF. At the same time, transition process in post-conflict contexts are often dominated by adult gatekeepers (such as regional elites, village elders, etc.) that limit youth participation, in particular in political processes. As a result, youth can find themselves doubly excluded. Just as importantly, discursive notions of youth in contexts of conflict are often understood within ideological frames and definitions that push forward certain lines of programming that can be detached from their actual lived experiences, needs, and understandings. The dominant discourses surrounding youth in contexts of conflict tend to focus on youth as development investments, or as threats to security, or as agents of change.[2] Such discourses largely guide the types of interventions made by external actors seeking to mitigate conflict or promote peacebuilding. Yet, such interventions and vocabularies can be tinged with paternalistic attitudes and the imposition of social and cultural norms and expectations that are disconnected from how youth themselves view their lives, their interpretations of their context, and their ambitions for themselves and their communities.

In publishing this study, the Arab Reform Initiative is contributing new knowledge on Iraqi youth in the context of the post-ISIS conflict and current Tishreen uprising, taking as its point of departure how youth themselves narrate and navigate their trajectories, choices, aspirations, and interpretations and the heterogeneity of youth lived experience. In turn, this ground-up, evidence-based research can be utilized to adapt policies, programs, and responses designed for, with, and by youth to ensure that they account for the diverse realities of Iraqi youth today, and to ensure that they are not left behind in the post-conflict period.

Sarah Anne Rennick
Deputy Director - Arab Reform Initiative

1 With regards to precarity, youth can find themselves doubly excluded: they are not the targets of much of the rights-based programming that is afforded to children and are also limited by adult gatekeepers who constrain their opportunities for participation. Moreover, their trajectories in contexts of conflict, and particular the transition to post-conflict, are particularly precarious as they do not have an existing pre-conflict status to which they can default. As youth are entering their adulthood during the context of conflict, their strategies for livelihood and wellbeing are entirely shaped around the conflict; as that context shifts, though, these strategies can be rendered obsolete without necessarily leaving any obvious way forward.

2 See in particular Siobhan McEvoy-Levy, "Children, Youth, and Peacebuilding" in **Critical Issues in Peace and Conflict Studies: Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy**, Thomas Matyok, Jessica Senehi, and Sean Bryne (eds). Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011.

Executive Summary

Since 2014, Iraq's reality reflects a society in full territorial, political, and socio-economic fragmentation, a context where the concept of a "post-conflict" period is nuanced and multi-layered. While it is clear that since the end of 2017 the territorial war against ISIS is relatively over, conflict nonetheless resurges regularly and agents of violence remain in place. Likewise, the mass protest movement of October 2019 has heralded a new type of social conflict that experiences waves of mobilization and demobilization within a broader context of repression and upheaval. As such, Iraqis have entered a new phase in their history, marked by various forms of insecurity (physical, economic, health) as well as new demands made on the State. The research undertaken here focuses on the paths of young Iraqis in this new phase, and in particular the factors driving their decisions, how they perceive opportunities and constraints, how they view their future, and how they assess government/NGO programming targeting them.

Based on 75 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2020 with youth in Mosul and Basra, youth's personal narratives demonstrate that area-specific community conditions entail different paths for young people and multiple factors driving young people's decision-making. There is thus an impossibility of speaking of Iraqi youth as one block. Instead, what can be seen is a high degree of fragmentation and division in terms of action strategies and views towards collective action, and very distinct perceptions of how inclusion and integration can occur within a broader context of a State that – in the eyes of its youth – cannot be trusted.

In the Nineveh province, youth face a situation of historical structural and systematic exclusion resulting from predominantly Shia Baghdad central government implementing the decree on de-Baathification[3] and the ensuing lack of access to services. Yet, after the territorial defeat of ISIS in 2017, a new type of path for this region's youth emerged, shaped by the fear of being associated with ISIS terrorism but also the deployment of Shia militias, which has forced young people to embark on paths that enable them to be recognized as separate from ISIS. In Basra, on the contrary, young people are involved in other types of action that reflect the different realities of their ethno-sectarian background but also the geographically defined differences in terms of experience of conflict. Many youth collectively and massively joined militia organizations between 2014 and 2018, joining their ranks as an act of patriotism. After ISIS' defeat, however, they have found themselves collectively unemployed, with no economic or educational prospects. Feeling abandoned by the Iraqi government, these young people were driven to engage in various protest movements making new claims on the State.

Within these different contexts, each type of stakeholder manages his/her opportunities and constraints differently. In Mosul, in a context of militia repression and ISIS terrorism, young people prioritize security constraints and survival. In contrast, young people in Basra are mainly driven by the need to survive, particularly those involved in the protest movement. Some just want to stay alive to continue the socio-political struggle, others are focused on the revolutionary struggle. All of these strategies are being carved out against a very high unemployment rate among youth, who face an almost total lack of opportunities.

The narratives of youth in the two provinces of Nineveh and Basra clearly highlight the diversity of young people's paths depending on their context. Given that the country has long been regionally divided into communities with local specific logic, the paths of Nineveh youth do not necessarily connect with those of the Basra youth. The traces left by the brutal experience of ISIS in Mosul, the domination of Shia militias in their largely Sunni territory, and the fear of being associated with ISIS, acts to constrict the action strategies of youth in Nineveh province, as opposed to the range of forms of engagement and belief in collective action of those in Basra and the South, where militia violence and State failure are major causes of youth engagement for or against the protest movement. While Basra youth are fighting within the protest movement to contribute to building a sovereign State capable of offering quality services to these citizens, a State freed from Iranian domination and respectful of the dignity of Iraqis, young people in Mosul are fighting for survival against the resurgence of the Islamic State, against an Iraqi State that excludes them, and militia organizations that see them as traitors. Put more broadly, in Basra, factors driving young people's decision-making are macro-narratives (building an independent State, national sovereignty, democratization, etc.); however, for Mosul youth, decision-making is driven by micro-narratives mostly (finding a job, pursuing hobbies, etc.).

To get out of the fragmented context and build an "inclusive Iraqiness" through which youth inclusion can be fulfilled, a new political project of nation-state renewal must be drawn up by the actors in power. However, given existential threats being faced by the State, along with a general disregard of young people, it is unlikely that such a political project can emerge or that pathways for youth political, economic, and social integration can be put into place. This, in turn, will continue to fuel Iraqi youth's deep-seated mistrust of State institutions and their largely shared belief that the Iraqi state has failed.

3 Harith Al Dabbagh, « De-Baathification in Iraq: transitional justice or simple revenge? » In: Quebec Journal of International Law, volume 27-1, 2014, pp. 31-60; https://www.persee.fr/doc/rqdi_0828-9999_2014_num_27_1_1359

Introduction

Is there an Iraqi youth? Is it possible to develop a global profile of the young Iraqi? These questions are difficult to answer. Much like the Iraqi society, the Iraqi nation, and the Iraqi state, it is very difficult to capture the identity of Iraqi youth, fragmented at the regional, sectarian, ethnic, and political levels. Speaking of a singular "Iraqi youth" only stems from ideological structure or wishful thinking, because Sunni youths of Mosul are not similar to Shia youths of Basra, who themselves barely share anything with Kurdish youths of Sulaymaniyah. This youth can only be approached in the plural.

A key issue for the country's future and a major strategic challenge for the fragile State, Iraqi youth could unquestionably prove to be a defining factor in what Iraq is and what the country could be as a society and State. According to the Iraqi Minister of Planning, Iraqi youth accounts for 68% of the population.[4] They are mostly excluded, at odds with political elites topping the social hierarchy, discontent with what they describe as "unsuitable" social and economic conditions, and strongly committed to the protest movement. A large group of this youth wants to oppose this generation of "dinosaurs,"[5] i.e., the former opposition of Saddam Hussein's regime which acceded in 2003 thanks to the American occupation of Iraq.

Instead of listening to, understanding, and responding to the aspirations of the youth, these "dinosaurs" would rather make value judgments, sometimes describing them as a "dangerous generation" or as "agents of embassies " at other times. Therefore, repressive security approaches are always prioritized over dialogue, mediation, and inclusion. Indeed, to deal with the protest movement dominated by the youth and launched on 01 October 2019, the Iraqi State relies on this perspective. In three months, between 01 October 2019 and 31 December 2019, 669 casualties were recorded along with 24,488 injured and 2,806 arrests.[6] Assassinations, kidnappings, hostage-taking, imprisonment, torture, threats to the individual and the family: the youth movement finds itself vulnerable and defenseless against an authority that kills without restraint, and by all means at its disposal.[7]
Who are these youths? How do they self-identify? How do they determine their expectations? How do they perceive the future? For those experiencing the social conflict of the October 2019 movement, what drives their participation in the protest movement? Likewise, for those who have experienced violence in the context of the ISIS conflict, how do acts of violence by the State and militias, at the tribal, sectarian, ethnic, and terrorist levels, affect young people? How do they intend to build their future political and social structure within Iraqi society? How do they develop action strategies to overcome the obstacles to their callings, projects, and dreams? And how, given the variety of contexts of upheaval that are present in Iraqi today, do they understand and envision a peaceful society and co-existing in a calm country?

In order to address these questions and understand the trajectories of Iraqi youth in different contexts of conflict, the and the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) in partnership with the Institute for Research and Mediterranean Middle East Studies (iReMMO) conducted research from 2020-2021 in two major Iraqi provinces: Mosul and Basra. 75 face-to-face interviews were organized with young Iraqis between 18 and 26 years old with different profiles, social identities, and socioeconomic backgrounds in order to assess how different social, geographic, and economic locations produce different transitions to adulthood and different perceptions of and opportunities for inclusion. In parallel to the more than 225 hours of conversation that were collected, research on State and non-State actors which intervene in different ways, offering policy frameworks and inclusion-oriented programming for young people in the country, was also undertaken between 01 July 2020 and 30 June 2021. Finally, this evidence gathering was completed with a full-day round table discussion in October 2021, with Iraqi youth activists from across the country.

The narratives of youth in the two provinces of Nineveh and Basra clearly highlight the diversity of young people's paths depending on their context. Given that the country has long been regionally divided into communities with local specific logic, the paths of Nineveh youth do not necessarily connect with those of the Basra youth. Whereas Basra youth are concerned with macro-level issues of inclusion and change (building a sovereign State capable of offering quality services to these citizens), Mosul youth are instead focused on micro-level issues of inclusion, and in particular finding pathways for their own personal development and socioeconomic integration. Likewise, the traces left by the brutal experience of ISIS in Mosul, the domination of Shia militias in their largely Sunni territory, and the fear of being associated with ISIS, acts to constrict the action strategies of youth in Nineveh province, as opposed to the range of forms of engagement and belief in collective action of those in Basra and the South, where militia violence and State failure are major causes of youth engagement for or against the protest movement.

Given this, the research shows that building an "inclusive Iraqiness," among youth, a universal vision and cause around

4 Statement of Khalid Batal Najim, Minister of Planning on 14 June 2021. https://www.nasnews.com/kurd/view.php?cat=28963

5 Recurrent term during interviews in Mosul and Basra.

6 Iraqi War Crimes Documentation Centre, 13 January 2020, https://iwdc-iraq.org

7 Amnesty International, "Iraq: a campaign of terror", 19 December 2019. https://www.amnesty.fr/liberte-d-expression/actualites/irak-campagne-de-terreur

which to rally, is difficult, given a situation of social, cultural, and even territorial division between young people. It is not enough to highlight the existence of common concerns among young people, such as the fight against corruption, the rejection of militias, or requests for operational public services. Indeed, even having similar values – such as the importance of religion in social life – is not necessarily sufficient. Iraqiness as a political project of an Iraqi nation can only be achieved based on interactions among citizens. The transition from community identity to national identity, from communitarianism to an open and inclusive nationalism, requires a smooth exit from the situation of division and brutality that has so marked the lived experiences of the country's youth.

Paths and Strategies: How Do Young People Build Their Lives in Conflict/ Post-Conflict Contexts?

In the Iraqi context, the concept of a "post-conflict" period is nuanced and multi-layered. While it is clear that since the end of 2017 the territorial war against ISIS is relatively over, conflict nonetheless resurges regularly and agents of violence remain in place. Likewise, the mass protest movement of October 2019 has heralded a new type of social conflict that experiences waves of mobilization and demobilization within a broader context of repression and upheaval. As such, Iraqis have entered a new phase in their history, marked by various forms of insecurity (physical, economic, health) as well as new demands made on the State. The research undertaken here focuses on the paths of young Iraqis in this new phase, and in particular the factors driving their decisions, how they perceive opportunities and constraints, how they view their future, and how they assess government/NGO programming targeting them

Before the war against the ISIS Caliphate in 2014, young people in Nineveh had suffered structurally and systematically as a result of the predominantly Shia Baghdad central government implementing the decree on de-Baathification.[8] Young Sunnis felt targeted. They were labeled as children of Baathists who had to pay for a "crime" they did not commit. As such, the feeling of being excluded from access to state resources – the civil service, military institutions, education and cultural avenues, favorable positions in the economic system, etc. – could be explained. Nineveh youth have been struggling throughout this period with this stigma, this profiling that has excluded them.

Yet, after the territorial defeat of ISIS in 2017, a new type of path for this region's youth emerged, in which a quasi-automatic connection was drawn between young people in Nineveh and ISIS terrorism. Indeed, the interviews show youth's perception that this type of narrative is constantly propagated, particularly in post-ISIS Sunni areas. The deployment of Shia militias has forced young people to embark on paths that enable them to be recognized as separate from ISIS. Unfortunately, even this strategy does not completely protect them from repression by Shia militias.

In Basra, on the other hand, young people are involved in other types of action. At first, they collectively and massively joined militia organizations between 2014 and 2018. During this period, militias were perceived as "saviors from the barbaric homeland of ISIS." As such, joining their ranks was seen as an act of patriotism. After ISIS was defeated, and the war was over, young people returned by the thousands to their towns and villages. Collectively unemployed, they had no economic or educational prospects. Feeling abandoned by the Iraqi government, these young people were driven to engage in various protest movements. Ironically, the militias which they had joined before, launched massive repression against them, killing 600 and injuring 23,000 defenseless young people.

What can be drawn from these youth's personal narratives is that area-specific community conditions entail different paths for young people, hence the impossibility of speaking of Iraqi youth as one block. Likewise, the multiple paths echo the multiple factors driving young people's decision-making.

While Basra youth are fighting within the protest movement to contribute to building a sovereign State capable of offering quality services to these citizens, a State freed from Iranian domination and respectful of the dignity of Iraqis, young people in Mosul are fighting for survival against the resurgence of the Islamic State, against an Iraqi State that excludes them, and militia organizations that see them as traitors. Put more broadly, in Basra, factors driving young people's decision-making are macro-narratives (building an independent State, national sovereignty, democratization, etc.); however, for

8 Harith Al Dabbagh, « De-Baathification in Iraq: transitional justice or simple revenge? » In: Quebec Journal of International Law, volume 27-1, 2014, pp. 31-60; https://www.persee.fr/doc/rqdi_0828-9999_2014_num_27_1_1359

Mosul youth, decision-making is driven by micro-narratives mostly (finding a job, pursuing hobbies, etc.).

Similarly, within these different contexts, each type of stakeholder manages his/her opportunities and constraints differently. In Mosul, a context of militia repression and ISIS terrorism, young people prioritize security constraints and survival. For Iraqi Kurdistan, the situation is different, being far from ISIS and the militias. There, the job search is the main concern of young people. In contrast, young people in Basra are mainly driven by the need to survive, particularly those involved in the protest movement. Some just want to stay alive to continue the sociopolitical struggle, others are focused on the revolutionary struggle. Against a very high unemployment rate among the youth (70% in Nasiriya), they have few to no opportunities and prospects. If they find opportunities, they have to jump through several hoops: political parties, militia organizations, and State institutions controlled by the two aforementioned entities. Yet at the same time, interviewees in Nineveh and Basra as well as participants to the round table express great distrust of targeted government programs. They believe that these programs have specific agendas, abide by certain ideologies, and only target a category of "tamed" youth affiliated with political parties in power. This distrust stems from the dichotomy that has been deepening for years between the upper class and the lower class of Iraqi society. While this mistrust is dampened towards international NGOs (given that civil society actors can expand their actions to include various categories of young people) there is insufficient availability of opportunities for inclusion as offered by the civil society sector to match the incredible demand for pathways for livelihood and employment for Iraqi youth today.

Youth of a Failed State: Cultivating a Society of Mistrust

On 01 May 2003, U.S. President George W. Bush declared victory for the Allies over Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Fresh after the war, Iraq entered a new political configuration. Baghdad's new elites needed to address key challenges: the reconstruction of the State and its governance, destroyed by the occupation; the establishment of security and stability in the country; and the efficient distribution of basic public goods and services.[9] The transition between Saddam Hussein's Iraq and US-occupied Iraq could only be achieved through constant interaction between these three imperatives; however, the Iraqi state's record between 2003 and 2021 on these counts is frightening indeed.

From the first government of Iyad Allawi (2004-2005) to the last government of Moustafa al-Kadhimi (2020-), the Iraqi State has been plagued with vulnerabilities. It is unable to provide citizens with the minimum level of security. Iraq Body Count, a UK-based group of researchers and analysts, published particularly terrifying figures. Between 2003 and 2020, there have been 208,486 civilian casualties (by contrast, the first year of American occupation resulted in 12,133 casualties). Under the Iyad Allawi government (2004-2005), the number of civilian casualties climbed to 28,319. During the Nouri al-Maliki government (2006-2014), insecurity reached a new record with a total of 114,263 casualties. The country is in utter failure. Death has become a "normal" fact of life in the Durkheimian sense. Moreover, the accession of moderates to power with Moustafa al-Kadhimi has no impact on the situation.

The Iraqi State also lacks a clear strategy for managing public services, deepening the gap between youth expectations and the quantitative and qualitative mediocrity of offered services. In large regions like Basra, where temperatures go above 50°C in the summer months, the Iraqi state only provides a few hours of electricity a day, on an irregular basis. This general situation of incompetence is also reflected in Baghdad's inability to meet drinking water needs, making it "one of the governorates most affected by water-borne diseases."[10] In this context, early in 2018, the World Bank invested 210 million dollars to fund a water supply and sewerage improvement project. According to UNICEF, 25% of Iraqis live on less than USD 2.00/day.[11] According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Iraq's debts have exceeded the red line: by the end of 2020, they had reached 120 billion dollars.[12] Despite extreme deficits, the conditions of public transport, roads, schools, universities, housing, even the health system, clearly show a country completely at the mercy of its vulnerabilities.

Beyond these deficiencies in terms of service provision, the Iraqi State has also proven unable to protect its citizens against ISIS. In 2014, in a few hours, major cities like Mosul and Tikrit were overtaken by ISIS without much noticeable resistance from the Iraqi army. And while during a visit to Paris in December 2017 the Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared the end of the Islamic State, by December 2021 ISIS was resurging with extraordinary force. Attacks against Iraqi

9 Derick W. Brinkerhoff et Ronald W. Johnson, "The Decentralization of Local Governance in Fragile States: Lessons Learned from the Iraq Case Study", *International review of administrative sciences*, vol. 75, n° 4, 2009, pp. 643-668

10 "Baghdad Water Supply and Sewerage Improvement Project, funded by the World Bank", see the press release on the official website of the World Bank (accessed on 9 February 2018). http://projects.worldbank.org/P162094?lang=ar

11 See the press release on Baghdad Today News website (accessed on 11 February 2018). https://bit.ly/3uth8mW

12 Karima Adnan, "Iraq's debts have crossed the red line", in Arabic, Al Hayat, issue of 23 November 2017.

forces (the army, Popular Mobilization Forces, the Peshmerga, the police, etc.), hostage-taking, kidnappings, and suicide attacks are on the rise. The international coalition against ISIS believes that a real threat continues to exist, as evidenced by the numerous visits of defense ministers from the EU and the region to Baghdad and Erbil.
Against this backdrop, young Iraqis make up a "society of mistrust" in every sense of the word. Their trust has been undermined by all Iraqi institutions, regardless of their geographic location (the South, the Center, or the North) or their ethno-sectarian community (Shia, Sunni, or Kurdish). The cross-community sentiment is felt throughout the country.

Zahara, a 26-year-old university graduate from Basra, said that she had totally lost her faith in the State which "cannot stop the criminals who murdered civil society activists, because the same criminals are part of this authority," adding that "as long as the State is not cleansed from these people, we cannot hope for a better future." She tried to highlight the breakdown of State institutions, starting with the judiciary: "In my country, the law only applies to the weak, the strong are above the law. We are in a jungle. The law that applies is the law of the jungle. The strong kill the weak." Omar, 25, a Sunni from Mosul with a high school diploma, confirms this opinion: "From 2003 to this day, all Iraqi governments have led us to failure and destruction, they are not there for us. They are there for themselves." Haider, a 24-year-old Basra resident without a diploma and involved in Saraya as-Salam (the Peace Brigades), a Moqtada Sadr militia organization, is much more radical: "What State are you talking about! There is no State. Even Kadhimi's government is a puppet... Everyone knows who really runs the country, Kadhimi himself is a puppet."

The new State elite, which took power after the fall of Saddam Hussein, has failed to rebuild functional institutions to serve citizens. Even worse, for Sardar, a young, single 24-year-old Yazidi from Mosul without a diploma, the ongoing post-war phase is "an era of betrayal, lies, and hypocrisy" fueled by politicians in power, whom "we must never, ever, ever trust." Abdullah, a 25-year-old single Sunni university student from Mosul, echoed the words of his fellow Yazidi: "I have no confidence whatsoever in the government, all our governments have only led to our collapse." Salwa, a 23-year-old single Christian accountant from Mosul considered that politics are quite simply cursed, "because it scares me, it's the devil's profession!"

Indeed, these are not isolated cases, but rather a discourse that has been adopted, internalized, and claimed by a youth that once had another vision of politics, like Sakina, a 22-year-old grad student of the Kakai[13] religion from Mosul: "I used to believe that we could make a change through politics, but today, I am very suspicious of our political elites. I lost faith in politics. In any case, we lost everything… They stole everything, even our dreams."[14]

Youth in a Society of Militias: Structural Divides and Opposing Perceptions

Decree no. 1 of 12 May 2003 on the "De-Baathification" of Iraqi society and Decree no. 2 on the Dissolution of the Iraqi Army - issued on 23 May 2003 by the Coalition Provisional Authority led by Paul Bremer - truly stripped Iraq of all institutions with almost a century-long state tradition. According to his personal testimony, Paul Bremer used this "cleansing" of Iraqi society, this void, to lay the first foundations for remaking the Iraqi state. The overhaul of the army, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Interior, and of all security and defense apparatuses affiliated with these two ministries, was carried out mostly through the integration of militias from what was formerly opposition to Saddam Hussein's regime. As a result, and upon U.S. insistence, the militias became the backbone of the post-Saddam state.

Against the landscape of a rising ISIS and the growing fear of Baghdad succumbing to Caliphate jihadists, Ayatollah Sistani issued a fatwa on 13 June 2014 asking Iraqis to form a popular mobilization to defend their country. This moment was pivotal for the militias which, thanks to this fatwa, became organized in the Hashd al-Shaabi, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) platform, officially under the command of the Prime Minister but independent, while still infiltrating all State institutions. Indeed, the Iraqi state has allocated 2.6 billion USD of its budget to these militias for 2021, which is the equivalent of the budget of the five following ministries combined: agriculture, industry, transport, water resources, and communication.

13 The Kakai do not identify as Muslims. They claim to belong to a religion known in the province of Mosul as **Yarsanism** in Kurdish, **Ahl il-Haqq** in Arabic. The Kakai are settled in a vast territory with several villages located in the provinces of Kirkuk, Diyala and Mosul.

14 This discourse identified throughout the interviews perfectly aligns with a previously quantitative survey carried out by the author in October 2019 with 350 Iraqis. According to this survey, 89% of respondents said that they have no confidence in Iraqi institutions and that it would be better to entrust an international enterprise with managing the State, rather than the elites who have run the country since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

In 2021, the number of militia organizations integrated into the PMF stands at 67, with 160,000 fighters replenishing Iraqi government ranks. However, perceiving these militias as a homogeneous entity with a unified leadership, a coherent political program, or bestowed with coordinated action strategies is totally at odds with a reality marked by antagonisms fueling military clashes resulting in death and injury among Shia militants themselves. As such, based on the analysis of the factual data on these antagonisms within militias, three distinctive militia categories are identified: the pro-Iranian militias, the Marjaiyya militias, and the nationalist militias.[15]

Upon analyzing the interviews, a dynamic relationship is identified between these militias and youth as a predominant social category in Iraqi society. Since established, the PMF has called upon young people directly to mobilize, organize, and sacrifice themselves to "save the nation" from "the barbaric ISIS." Motivated by Sistani's fatwa and by patriotism, young people, especially Shias, have responded positively and joined the PMF by the thousands. Between 2014 and 2018, for four long years, they fought against experienced jihadists without having any previous experience. Every day, families in the South receive the remains of their young sons who died in combat. Heartbroken, but proud of their sacrifice, they bury their martyrs. This is how the cult of "martyrdom" socially unfolded during this period, and became a determining principle of youth practices. However, the end of the war against ISIS, the resurgence of these organizations in everyday life, as well as their redeployment in social spaces, transformed their discourse, their practices, and their concretization – but also the 2014 quasi-consensus regarding them.

Within this new context, youth adherence to the PMF is underscored by different motivations. For some, adherence is based on ideological reasons. Their resocialization in the PMF training camps has proven a success, even after the war. This is the case of Kanan, the 24-year-old married Shia from Basra, who does not possess a high school diploma. He believes that, "Popular Mobilization is sacred. The members, especially those of Saraya as-Salam (Moqtada Sadr's militia), are men with integrity and they would sacrifice themselves for their country." For others, though, membership is by default: faced with a failing state, youth seek alternatives to protect themselves. For Hussein, a 23-year-old unemployed Shia graduate, married with no children from Basra, the PMF is the only alternative: "You know, young people carry arms because the State cannot protect them, their families, or their country. Young people carry weapons to play this role."

15 For more details about categories see Adel Bakawan, « Shiites in Power in Iraq: The Failure of the First Experience», *Carep*, 24 August 2020. https://www.carep-paris.org/publications/axes-de-recherche/les-chiites-au-pouvoir-en-irak-lechec-de-la-premiere-experience/

Indeed, this perception – a weak State and a strong PMF – among many youth is fundamental, especially in the South, as it gives meaning to their choices. This prompted Hassan, a 25-year-old married civil servant to tell us: "I support the Popular Mobilization Forces. Our homeland was saved thanks to them. PMF fighters protect the State and the population. I have been to the frontline and participated in the war, and I did not see the army. We were alone at the front, and I can never forget that."

However, since 2018, as the war against ISIS ended and these organizations returned from the front, there has been a change in perception, identification, and representation among the youth. Heavily armed militias were no longer at war. They spread out in cities and tried to impose their social, economic, political, and ethical vision of society. A section of society clearly accepted and supported this vision. Nevertheless, a very large and active part of young people categorically refused this vision and were ready to enter into a violent confrontation against the militias.

Ahmad, a Shia married young graduate from Basra, employed in a small business, is one of those young people who expressed their rejection of what they call "militias taking the State hostage." As he states, "The State is the only entity that should be in charge of our security." For Fatima, a 23-year-old Shia university student living in Basra, the PMF militias are a real "threat to the State and Iraqi society," and they are "the source of our misery because they kill, they steal, they rape, and they destroy the country…". Amnesty International has in fact documented evidence confirming Fatima's assertions. They clearly described the daily practices of the militias which have "extrajudicially executed or unlawfully killed, tortured, and kidnapped thousands of men and adolescents. Victims were kidnapped from their homes, workplaces, from IDP camps, at checkpoints, or other public places. Some were later found dead, shot dead. Thousands of other people have been missing for weeks, months, or even years since they were abducted."

This perception of the PMF militias highlights the divided society that no longer shares the same language, symbols, references, and prospects for the future. On one hand, we have young people who see the PMF militias as something sacred, a savior, a refuge, a protector. On the other hand, we have young people, like Nadia, a 25-year-old married Shia with a law degree, who think that these PMF militias are only "murderers, thieves and bandits, nothing more and nothing less, who have only one objective: to destroy the country." Thus, the divide between these two sections of society is embedded structurally. Undoubtedly, it is one of the major factors behind the commitment of young people to an unprecedented protest movement.

Youth and the Protest Movement: A Spectrum from Engagement, Misgiving, and Hostility

Young people's participation in the establishment, development, and deployment of the protest movement[16] in space and time is, without a doubt, an extremely striking fact. However, it would be a mistake in observation and analysis to perceive the stance of young people as a homogeneous block, united in anger, and collectively mobilized against the authority in place. This mainstreaming does not match a heterogeneous reality with an extraordinarily nuanced complexity, as reflected in the interviews. As such, at least three types of stances could be detected among young people vis-à-vis the protest movement.

Engaged Youth

In sociological terms, we can identify a part of the new generation who grew up with social media and, mostly, without formal education. They are socially disadvantaged, culturally poor, and represent the violated dream of an inaccessible better life, of an absent sociopolitical integration, and general mistrust. Noureddine, a young man from Basra, expressed this anger like most of his fellow citizens: "I am 24 years old. I couldn't go to university. I am unemployed. I don't have a salary. I can't start a family. Tell me, what am I? I am nothing, nothing at all. I would rather die in the street with my comrades than to live this life…". Similar sentiments were echoed by Suleiman, 25, a Shia from Basra who married with no children: "In Basra, we don't have the basic foundations of a decent life, we are treated like animals, we have to take to the streets."

It is indeed the anger of a "bulldozer" generation that is not fluent in the coded language of politicians. They do not have a clear vision of their action. The most repeated slogans are "toppling the regime" (deemed corrupt) and "we want a country" (thought to be non-existent to date). Ali, 23, Shia from Basra, explains: "We just want a State independent from Iran, a State that does its job. We just want a homeland, a nation of our own…".

Beyond these slogans, however, there is a total void. These youth have little understanding of the tools used by this establishment's representatives and the elites to defend their achievements and their advantages. With rising calls for toppling the regime, those benefitting from the regime have cracked down and imposed massive repression. As a result, the revolutionary logic, adopted perhaps unconsciously by this new generation, clashes with a radical logic of the unrestrained use of generalized violence. This explains the continuously increasing number of casualties and injured, not to mention the number of people arrested between 01 October and 31 December 2019.

This generation also does not have a clear vision of what lies behind the slogan "we want a country." On what foundations? With what system? What configuration? What is be the identity of this country? Arabs versus Kurds? Shias versus Sunnis? Muslims versus Christians? Or an inclusive identity bringing together Shias, Kurds, Sunnis, and the other components of Iraqi society? In this case, how, who, and what process will create this identity? So many questions to which this "revolutionary" generation, abandoned by the Republic to social networks, is unable to provide answers. It does not even see the point of finding answers to these questions, which are fundamental for young people who dream of building a "country" together.17

Fiercely Hostile Youth

After analyzing the interviews, another category of young people is identifiable, especially in Southern Iraq, that is distinct from engaged youth. This category strongly opposes the protest movement and expresses deep hostility towards it. Supported in ideological resocialization programs developed by militias and political parties linked to power and often, but not always, pro-Iranian, these young people think that the protest movement is a plot organized by the United States and Israel to constrain and defeat the first Shia state experiment in Iraq.

Mohamad, 25, a Shia from Basra, married and a civil servant, admits that the State has failed to offer quality services, "but that does not justify the revolt. We must help the government to improve services... We don't need more deaths. The demonstrators are manipulated by Americans and Israelis who plot against our country." Mohamad's speech is moderate compared to Saleh's, a 24-year-old militiaman of Saraya As-Salam from Basra: "These young people who are protesting are destroying our country, we must stop them by all means. Yes, there are problems, but the solution is not on the side of the Americans or the Israelis, but rather in the creation of the Islamic Republic in Iraq, just like Iran."

16 In an article published in 2020, we discussed in detail the components and dynamics of the protest movement in Iraq, we will not return to it here: Adel Bakawan, "The protest movement in Iraq: actors, paradigms, perspectives", Middle East Review, Middle East editions, n°6, 2020.

17 Adel Bakawan, « The Conditions of an Iraqi "dream"», *OLJ, 19 April 2019.* https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1167154/les-conditions-du-reve-irak-ien-.html

The failure of taking these young people who fight for a Shia Islamization of the State and who are ready to sacrifice themselves for an ideal incontestably prevents having a full picture of the context in which Iraqi youth find themselves. Concentrating on young people involved in the protest movement should in no way divert the gaze or the analysis. On the contrary, it is essential to take into account this second category of youth in the reconfiguration of the future of Iraq.

Disengaged Youth

Between these two antagonistic categories engaged in a cycle of mutual violence, because there are deaths on both sides, we notice the strong and significant emergence of the third category of youth. This one resides mainly in the province of Nineveh. These young people rather seek micro-narratives in their daily lives (finding a job, tending to hobbies or leisure, succeeding in their studies, etc.) than sacrifice themselves for macro-narratives (nationalism, Islamism, jihadism, tribalism, Communism, the protest movement, etc.). Indeed, the young people of Mosul interviewed here have developed a unique type of discourse in their particular Iraqi context. Mosul youth were born shortly before the occupation of Iraq by the Americans and the accession to power of highly communitarian Shia elites in Baghdad. They grew up in a context of systematic exclusion from the Sunni community, witnessing the repression of any demand for their elders to be included within the Iraqi State and society. They have suffered from an early age the catastrophic consequences of this sectarian violence.

Within this backdrop, the settling of the Caliphate in their territory between 2014 and 2017, and the daily violence by ISIS soldiers, shaped and transformed young people's way of being in Mosul. Abdulla, a single 25-year-old Sunni high school graduate from Mosul, expressed his support only for a protest movement that avoids "all forms of violence and remains peaceful and democratic because I am against violence."

This rejection of violence and mistrust of collective action in fact is mentioned in almost all the interviews with youth from this province, regardless of ethno-sectarian identity: similar discourse can be identified in the interviews carried out with young Christians, Kurds, Kakaiy, or Yazidi from the same province, as if there were a generational, common, shared, and shareable marker between the young people of the province, despite the diversity of their religions, denominations, and ethnicities. Salwa, a single 23-year-old Christian accountant, showed deep mistrust of the protest movement and clearly stated that it "cannot change the Iraqi reality." Sakina, a single 22-year-old Kakaiy student, went further, definingthe protest movement as a war machine: "There are casualties and injured people! Facing the movement, there are armed organizations that use violence and, because I am against violence, I cannot encourage the movement, even if their demands are completely legitimate. We must never forget that ISIS has been there."

ISIS is now part of the past as a territorial entity. However, the traces left by this brutal experience on the training of young people in Mosul, the domination of Shia militias in their Sunni territory, and the fear of being associated with ISIS, partly determine their action strategies, making them different from the youth of Basra, as we will see in the next section.

Youth and their Divided Dreams in a Conflict-Riddled Country

In the South, militia violence and State failure are major causes of youth engagement for or against the protest movement. In the North, the same conditions prompt young people to forms of individualization, self-reflection, disengagement, and concentration on the development of micro-projects making the individual the top priority. Analyzing the dreams and prospects of young people is a starting point to understand this gap that divides all the sections of Iraqi society. This divide has prevented youth from sharing the language and modes of everyday life, referential symbols, perceptions of collective memory, a reading of a century-worth of State history, and plans for the future.

To get out of the fragmented context and build an "inclusive Iraqiness," which is for the moment is an ideal that is difficult to reach, it is not enough to highlight the existence of common concerns among young people, such as the fight against corruption, the rejection of militias, or requests for operational public services. Likewise, highlighting the common practices among young people, such as the use of social media platforms, is not a guarantee either. Even having similar values – such as the importance of religion in social life – is not necessarily the precondition, on the contrary: without an inclusive political project drawn up by the actors in power, the presence of these indicators, "far from eroding identity demarcations, frequently contributes to strengthening them."[18]

Iraqiness as a political project of an Iraqi nation can only be

18 Alain Dieckhoff, The Nation in All its States: National Identities in Motion, [electronic version], Flammarion Editions, Paris, 2015, p. 24.

achieved based on interactions among citizens. However, the interviews reveal that we are in a situation of social, cultural, even territorial division between young people. Therefore, the transition from community identity to national identity, from communitarianism to an open and inclusive nationalism, requires a "smooth" exit from the situation of "division," without the brutality that has marked the history of Iraq.

Khalid, a young Shia man from Basra, 25, who married and with one child and who has a university degree and is employed, dreams of an Iraqi state that doesn't treat young people as members of a religious community but as citizens with rights in modern society. The macro-narrative of a State with strong institutions, modernity, and transparency has become Khalid's dream around which he organizes his life. On the other hand, for Sarmad, a 25-year-old young Sunni man from Mosul, single and still a student, his fight is on a micro-scale, a micro-narrative, focusing on himself, to finish his studies, to obtain a diploma and have a job that allows him to become independent in his social universe. In harmony with his dream, Sarmad strongly refuses the idea of getting married and having children for the moment.

The contrast between Khalid's world and Sarma's world is the reflection of two Iraqi provinces that are no longer capable of establishing modes of interaction and meeting spaces. While Mansour, a young 26-year-old Shia from Basra, a militiaman in Moqtada Sadr's Saraya as-Salam, devotes himself to achieving his macro-dream (transforming the Iraqi State into a Jafarite republic), Marwan, a young Sunni man from Mosul, himself single, dreams of leaving his country for good, which he describes as "hell." Marwan's dream is Europe where, "I could live as a human being, live my personal life, far from all these disasters. I don't want to follow my father, I don't want to replicate him, I want to live my life fully."

The same distance stands between Mansour, a young Iraqi committed to changing the world, and Marwan, another young Iraqi committed to changing his world, and between the dream of Jafar, a 24-year-old from Basra, who wants to go to Syria to wage jihad alongside Bashar al-Assad (whom he sees Bashar as the protector of the holy places of Shiism in Syria) and the dream of Nour, a 23-year-old Sunni student from Mosul, who wishes to draw her path to becoming a film actress. The analysis of the interviews shows that we have at least two distant Iraqi youths, without any opportunity to create links, bonds, and spaces for exchange between them. As a result, we are faced with two categories of young people with different dreams, goals, and perceptions of their future.

Women Youth in a Male Dominant Society: The Impossibility of Appearance

Since 2003, post-Saddam Hussein Iraq has become the promised land of NGOs that mainly defend women's rights. The conditions of Iraqi women and their empowerment lie at the heart of the action of at least 200 organizations. Paul Bremer, the American governor of Iraq after 2003, devoted a significant part of his work to this issue, believing that the empowerment of Iraqi women was a pillar in the reconstruction process. Yet, Saddam Hussein had the same vision regarding women, long before Paul Bremer. Through the modernization of the socio-educational sector, Saddam Hussein thought that the transition to the modern world would undeniably go through creating a new image of a cultured, educated, and trained Iraqi woman. He mobilized State institutions to accomplish this historic mission. While in 1970 only 34% of girls were in school; ten years later the percentage had increased to 95%. In the early 1980s, women made up 46% of teachers, 29% of doctors, 70% of pharmacists, 46% of dentists.[19] However, Saddam Hussein's never-ending wars between 1980 and 2003 jeopardized all that he accomplished. During this period, Iraqi women once again found themselves in very uncomfortable social, economic, and security conditions, marked by violence, unemployment, and the impossibility of access to education and culture.

The arrival of Paul Bremer in Baghdad in 2003, despite his intentions, did not change the real living conditions of women. On the contrary, in a context marked by occupation, terrorism, and insecurity, the prospect of empowering Iraqi women was dwindling, and men were increasingly asserting their total control over society. This is what Zahra, 26, from the city of Basra in which she obtained a university degree, clearly told us in her interview:

"You know, in Iraq, we have a society of men where there is no place for women. For example, you will rarely find a space, a place, where we as women can exercise a leisure activity, meet... We are not allowed in cafés, cinemas, theatres, stadiums... If a girl ever dares to participate in a collective activity, she is quickly targeted and judged by men. What's even worse is that these men will create a social doubt about her credibility and her ethics. Our place is the house, and when we go out, we must remain very vigilant, very wise,

19 Adel Bakawan, *Iraq*, a century of failure, Tallandier editions, 2021, p.151 (the publishing of this book is excpected in August).

respect social norms, look down, cover up, in short, we are the property of men, we are the domain of men…"

Zahra's last sentence perfectly reflects a common vision among a large part of the elites who came to power thanks to the American occupation of Iraq. The Iraqi constitution has indeed set a quota for women in parliament, granting them 25% of seats. However, this same Parliament has clearly tried to legalize marriage for girls from the age of 9.[20] According to a survey, it is in such context that 84.6% of Iraqi women who were questioned declared that their living conditions had worsened since the occupation of Iraq in 2003.[21] It is not because Paul Bremer imposed a quota of 25% of women on the Iraqi elites in the National Assembly that they now have more rights in their everyday life. On the contrary, the increasing pressure and coercion on Iraqi women push them to dream of leaving the country and going somewhere else where they might find their dignity. This is what Laila, a 22-year-old girl from Basra, a graduate of the Petroleum Institute, tells us: "I dream of leaving this city and going to Erbil. Here, I die every day, everything is haram for a girl like me, music, cinema, theatre, love, everything is haram…"

This country in which there are 2 million widows, and 5 million orphans now, no longer inspires young women who dream of a better life. This is why some women, particularly in the South, are involved in the protest movement, a movement that allows them to breathe, have relative freedom, and limited empowerment. Houda, a 25-year-old married woman from Basra, with a bachelor's degree, tells us: "The protest movement gives women a very rare opportunity to appear, even though this appearance is relative. The movement has a positive impact on this outdated link between women and men." Nonetheless, other women like Shadia from Mosul, a 23-year-old teacher, do not want to engage in the protest movement to achieve their dreams of empowerment: "I dreamed of being an artist, playing on stage, but this society killed my dream, my future, my beauty, my youth. In this society of men, I don't have a place as a woman…I dream of going to Istanbul, going elsewhere, to a place where I could exist."

20 Ribau, Patrick. « Women of Iraq », La Pensée, vol. 384, no. 4, 2015, pp. 125-130.

21 Katrina LEE-KOO « Gender-Based Violence Against Civilian Women in Postinvasion Iraq: (Re) Politicizing George W. Bush's Silent Legacy », in *Violence against Women,* 2011, vol. 17, n. 12, p.1621.

Youth in a Context of Generalized Violence: Normalization and Internalization vs. Rejection

The spread of sectarian violence in Iraq from 2003 until today is a continuation of a "culture of violence" that has characterized the country's history since its creation in 1921. Wars, occupations, resistance, revolutions, insurrections, and protests have transformed the country into a factory producing all kinds of violence: violence by nationalists, violence by Communists, violence by Baathists, violence by ethnic groups, violence by tribes, violence by terrorists, and finally violence by sectarians. In this sense, the Iraqi universe has been structured by violence since the founding of the State to this day. It is transmitted from generation to generation, and it becomes a socialization program that never stops. Institutions like the family, the neighborhood, the school, the mosque, the university, and even museums, are places where this culture of violence can be transmitted.

Given this, a question regarding youth is the extent to the Iraqi context is normalizing, domesticating, and internalizing violence as a social phenomenon. Ali, a 26-year-old young man from Basra, who has a university degree and is involved in the militia organization of Saraya as-Salam, thinks that arms are the only way to settle conflict: "Whoever tells you they don't own a weapon is not honest, because weapons are everywhere, from North to South, we are all armed. All conflicts are settled by and with weapons, even the smallest ones." His rhetoric is consistently repeated and confirmed by a large part of the young people interviewed in the South, even among those involved in the protest movement who hold the opinion that only revolutionary violence can change things. Hassan, a young man from Basra, 24 years old, married, childless, unemployed, and therefore without income, explains to us that: "War is a natural state of societies, it is part of us, and when we do not take this reality into account, we are quickly destroyed by others. In any case, that's my daily situation and that's what I see every day."

This vision of violence is always publicly fueled by the new ruling elites to justify a category of violence qualified as sectarian. As Hanan al-Fatlawi, a Shia elected MP and president of the Irada movement, publicly stated, "When they kill seven Shias, I also want seven Sunnis to be killed.

Seven against seven, that's the equation![22]" The catastrophic consequences of this situation on the ideological formation of certain categories of young people are quite evident .Jafar, a-23 year-old young man from Basra ,raised in this sectarian mentality ,tells us without any reservations" :The Sunnis have killed thousands of Shias ,that is why our war against them is holy .Shias are in constant danger ,and we must remain very vigilant ".Moumin, a 24-year-old without a diploma, confirms Jafar's words: "I believe that if you are not strong, the wolves will come after you… We Shias must be strong… Look at what the terrorists have done to us. They massacred thousands of us, and they are supported by the Sunnis who were delighted that ISIS massacred us."

On the other hand, the young people we interviewed from the province of Mosul are very skeptical about the spread and culture of violence. Abdullah, a 25-year-old Sunni student, totally rejects State violence and violence against the State, because he believes that "violence is not a solution, but a problem." Karim, a 22-year-old Sunni student, dreams of living in a society without violence, but because his dream is not achievable in his country, he takes refuge in reading his books. Salawa, a 23-year-old Christian from Mosul, also rejects "all forms of violence, violence is not a solution."

While admittedly, in the two provinces of Basra and Mosul, there are almost certainly young people who think differently and interconnections could be observed between the two groups, we nonetheless must admit that the line of demarcation between the youth of Mosul and that of Basra is an observable sociological reality. This reality reflects the general state of a society in full territorial, political, and socioeconomic fragmentation. To date, there is not a single nationally influential political power that could offer a solution to save the country from this fragmentation.

Conclusion

In Iraq today, two generations clash: the generation preceding the fall of Baghdad, and the generation after establishment of the post-2003 order. The one that has run the country since 2003 and the one that is in a state of structural antagonism with it. The one that has access to all resources and the one that is deprived of all resources. The one sitting at the top of society and the one scraping by at the bottom of society. Each has its markers, its dreams, its operating system, its directions, and its action strategies.

The generation opposed to Saddam Hussein's regime was born in a country ruled by a totalitarian regime, where the most sensitive details of society were controlled by a Baath party, and where one man, Saddam Hussein, represented the ultimate truth. The generation opposed to this regime dreamed of liberal democracy, of a society of citizens, and the end of the dictatorship. This generation was exiled in Iran, Europe, and the United States and engaged in a military and diplomatic fight against the Baathist regime. It finally came to power in 2003, thanks to the U.S. occupation of the country. Since it came to power and to this date up to the present day, this generation has developed a political system, mediating State-society relations, scarred by a number of characteristics. These include the sectarianism built into the system,[23] rampant corruption, social classification and structural inequalities based on the distribution of rents along ethno-sectarian lines, the militia-ization of the State,[24] a situation of "co-management," whereby the independence of Iraq is only symbolic because in reality the country is now governed by effective cooperation, even massive partnership, between Washington and Tehran.

In the face of this generation installed in power since 2003 arises the country's youth, born in the 2000s. This generation, which has been transitioning to adulthood in a general state of territorial, political, and socio-economic fragmentation and within contexts of different political and social conflicts, adopts various types of action strategies in the construction of self. These are marked by the lack of trust in the system and a structural rupture with the system formed by the previous generation. The trajectories, commitments, and characteristics of this new Iraqi youth show a largely shared belief that the system represents absolute evil and the source of all dramas, and that exist from chronic crises cannot occur until this system is abolished. The system is therefore identified as enemy number one.

Yet at the same time, this generation, which did not experience the totalitarianism of Saddam Hussein's regime and was formed in a country occupied by the United States, and which set itself the goal of creating a rule of law in Iraq, does not surrender to fear, despite the brutality of the militia organizations. This generation would like to be visible and heard through different approaches, especially the one related to the occupation of public places, and does not want to be seen as victims but as actors who dream of changing the world. Nonetheless, these aspirations do not prevent young people from getting involved in militia organizations or simply disengaging from collective action for the purpose of pursuing other priorities. For some Iraqi youth, involvement in a social movement is considered a paradigm of action. The regime is not identified as an enemy to be defeated,

22 Hanan al-Fatlawi interview with Sumaria TV, 5 April 2014. https://youtu.be/_xa7DNpGW-s

23 According to a tradition practiced within the Iraqi state, 50% of positions are held by Shias, 25% to Sunnis, 20% to Kurds, and 5% to minorities.

24 Since 2014, the Iraqi State has witnessed the Popular Mobilization, which brings together around 75 militia organizations. Note that the number of organizations changes regularly, some groups disappear and others appear, hence the difficulty of determining a reliable number.

but rather as an adversary in a conflict. The objective is not the disappearance of a post-2003 system, but a negotiation to obtain what is possible. We no longer place ourselves in the paradigm of a revolution, a future, or a final struggle, but rather building bridges with opponents in power. Yet for other young people, other strategies are adopted, consisting of distancing themselves from the political sphere in general. These categories, depoliticized for various reasons (fear of community revenge, exclusion, lack of access to education and culture, etc.), develop their daily action strategies without taking into account the parameters of political issues. They do not feel concerned by the modes of action of the protest movement or by the mechanisms of repression of the government or the militias.

In other words, Iraqi youth today – having experienced quite different contextual realities as a result of geographically-delimited conflict trajectories and the ensuing impact on relationships with the State, militias, and violence – are living in worlds that are organized differently and in which they carve out their transitions to inclusion in quite different ways. In the highly conflictual Iraqi context, the Iraqi government must urgently manage a number of pressing issues, including the return of ISIS, the Turkish offensive in the North, the deepening disagreement between Erbil and Baghdad, the radicalization of certain militia organizations, the threat of civil war and the scenario of the "Yemenization" of Iraq, and the looming possibility of economic bankruptcy. Meanwhile, meaningful inclusion of Iraqi youth likely relies on the development of a political project of a renewed Iraqi nation; however, this can only be achieved through interactions among citizens. The narratives of the country's youth reveal that we are in a situation of social, cultural, even territorial division that presents this Iraqiness from emerging organically. The transition from community identity to national identity, from communitarianism to an open and inclusive nationalism, requires a "smooth" exit from the situation of "division," without the brutality that has marked the history of Iraq. Sadly, in a situation where the State is facing existential issues concerning its security, its sovereignty, and its stability, Iraqi youth and tending to their needs, aspirations, and full political, social, and economic integration remain off the list of priorities.

About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.

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